

Tamil Tigers: Promises of Feminism and Liberation During and After Conflict

Executive Summary

Former female fighters with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam face numerous challenges as they reintegrate into society. The Sri Lankan government's Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration program has significantly invested in programming to bridge former fighters' transition to peacetime, but this programming must be reevaluated to incorporate gender considerations in the economic, social, and political arenas. In order to address these deficiencies, the Sri Lankan Government should do the following:

Invest in non-feminized economic opportunities for former female cadres

DDR programs must address social aspects of former cadres' reintegration

Avenues must be provided for former cadres, especially women, to take on political roles

LTTE and the Civil War

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) formed as a political movement and developed into a separatist group fighting for an independent state for the Tamil ethnic group in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.¹ The Sri Lankan Civil War was fought between the LTTE and Sri Lankan state forces from 1983 to 2009. British colonial rule privileged the Tamil ethnic group, the minority, over the majority Sinhalese ethnic group. Following British departure, a majority Sinhalese government implemented policies which marginalized Tamils.² The Sinhala language was officially afforded higher status than Tamil; universities admitted fewer and fewer Tamil students; Buddhism (practiced mainly by Sinhalese) was favored; and the state supported the formation of Sinhalese farming communities on land which Tamils considered to be part of their homeland.³ An estimated 100,000 people died during the civil war, and both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE were accused of committing atrocities against civilians.⁴



Map courtesy of the University of Central Arkansas Political Science Department, 2007.

¹ Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov, "Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" 9 (2007): 45.

² This is an oversimplification of minority and majority status, the role of class, and the rapid and drastic swings from privileged to marginalized, and vice versa, of both Tamils and Sinhalese during and after British colonial rule. For a more comprehensive overview, see Ahmed S. Hashim, "Background to War: State Formation and Identities in Conflict," in *When Counterinsurgency Wins, Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 50–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhcqp.6>.

³ This is a brief overview and is not intended to be a complete list of the ways in which Tamils were marginalized leading up to the Civil War; for this and more, see Hashim.

⁴ "World Report 2010: Rights Trends in Sri Lanka," Human Rights Watch, January 20, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/sri-lanka>.

Women, the LTTE, and the Civil War

Women played a major role in the LTTE ranks during the war: Over 20% of LTTE forces and 25% of suicide bombers were female. Further, many women reached the highest levels of leadership within the LTTE, a unique opportunity in a society which restricted women's roles to the home. This section will explore Tamil Women's role pre-conflict, during conflict and after the conflict.

Pre-conflict

Tamil women were marginalized in Sri Lankan society prior to the war. They were expected to follow the ideas of *addaccam* (modesty and silence) and *odduccam* (poise and restraint).⁵ Further, Tamil women's mobility was limited due to the constant scrutiny of their movement by the male population.⁶ These gender constructions were deeply entrenched in Tamil society and afforded little freedom or power to women. Sinhalese women faced similar gender barriers, but were not restricted from opportunities due to their ethnicity. They were, in fact, permitted even to rise to the highest political office, as Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike did in 1960.⁷

During conflict:

In general, women tend to be involved in or actively support⁸ a conflict for a variety of reasons, including forced recruitment, agreement with war goals, patriotism, religious or ideological motives, a lack of educational opportunities, and economic necessity.⁹ Throughout decades of violence in Sri Lanka, women were pivotal both as activists for peace and justice¹⁰ and as fighters. While in most cases joining a party to the conflict was the only way of survival, in some cases, female soldiers joined the LTTE to obtain equal rights and liberties and/or to flee or fight oppression.¹¹ Women initially joined the Tamil Tigers in support roles, becoming combatants in 1985. It was estimated that women comprised 3 out of 10 Central Committee members (the highest decision-making body of the LTTE).¹² Reportedly, there was no discrimination based on sex; most women believed in the slogan 'equity for the nation and equality at home.'¹³¹⁴ These ideologies hit the sweet spots that Tamil women desired, giving them space to achieve equality with male counterparts. Many joined because they identified with the LTTE's ideologies of



Female LTTE members. Image courtesy of the BBC, 2008.

⁵ Yamuna Sangarasivam, "Militarizing the female body: women's participation in the Tamil nationalist struggle," in *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender and the State*, ed. Arturo J Aldama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 65.

⁶ Sangarasivam.

⁷ Makshood, Akeela, "The Ideal of Liberation: Women in Sri Lanka's Civil War" (2017). History Honors Program. 4.

⁸ Tsjard Bouta, Georg Frerks, and Ian Bannon, "Gender and Warfare: Female Combatants and Soldiers' Wives," *Gender, Conflict, and Development* (World Bank, 2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02478.9>.

⁹ Birgitte Sorensen, "Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources," *Social Change* 29, no. 3-4 (September 1999): 333-333, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908579902900423>.

¹⁰ "Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War," Crisis Group, July 28, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/289-sri-lanka-conflict-affected-women-dealing-legacy-war>.

¹¹ Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon, "Gender and Warfare."

¹² Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon.

¹³ Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon.

¹⁴ There were three significant aims for the Women's front: 1) securing the right of self-determination of Tamil-Eelam and establishment of an independent democratic state; 2) abolish oppressive caste discrimination and division and feudal customs such as the dowry system; 3) eliminate any discrimination, securing social, political and economical equality. See Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "Soldiers, Housewives and Peace Makers: Ethnic Conflict and Gender in Sri Lanka." *Gender Peace and Security Research Hub* 14.2 (1996): 217.

liberation; others held significant grievances against state forces for sexual harassment. Toward the later years of the conflict, when the LTTE began requiring one person from each family to join the cadres, many women joined to take the place of their younger siblings.¹⁵ Some women took on roles as suicide bombers, using society's perception of them as less dangerous, and carried out suicide bombings targeting key political figures in India and in Sri Lanka.¹⁶ It is not clear whether gender parity was the goal of women's recruitment or whether, more cynically, recruitment of women was simply a measure to fill shortages in the ranks.

Post-Conflict

Following the defeat of the LTTE, the promises made for female liberation were not fulfilled and many women returned to their marginalized positions. This backslide was exacerbated by the DDR process, which, although well-funded and intentioned, was lacking in a gendered approach to aid Tamil women after the war.

Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration (DDR)

With the end of the war in 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) carried out intensive reintegration programs for the male and female LTTE fighters who surrendered.¹⁷ This included job and skills training and importantly, 'moral' and social rehabilitation.^{18,19} The state-led programs followed a restorative justice model rather than the classic retributive justice model.²⁰ The model named '6+1 model' consisted of different modes of rehabilitation and community engagement in the areas of 1) Education, 2) Vocational 3) Psychosocial and creative therapies 4) Social, cultural and family, 5) Spiritual and religious 6) Recreational and community rehabilitation.²¹ The Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation was founded and rehabilitation centers, Protective Accommodation and Rehabilitation Centers, were established.²² Detainees were categorized into groups; serious insurgent categories consisted mainly of frontline leaders and members and were sent to detention, not rehabilitation.²³ Additionally, they were forced to go through judicial processing following the investigations and assessments, and if detainees cooperated they were given the option of joining the rehabilitation process.²⁴

The GoSL Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation concluded that rehabilitation efforts were successful, and considered over 11,600 former combatants to be rehabilitated and reintegrated.²⁵ Out of nearly 12,000 DDR program participants, there were 594 children, 9,374 adult males, and 2,032 adult females.²⁶ The Bureau noted that new marriages developed and families were created, which the GoSL considered to be an indicator of the rehabilitation program's success.²⁷ The GoSL also measured reintegration success based on total number of reintegrated beneficiaries, their occupation, and the provision of bank loans to ex-combatants.²⁸ The GoSL has not shared the variables considered in its calculation of success of reintegration, though reports monitoring progress of reintegrated ex-combatants by the Socio Economic Welfare Coordinating Office for Rehabilitated Beneficiaries have been positive.²⁹

¹⁵ Rebekka Friedman, "Remnants of a Checkered Past: Female LTTE and Social Reintegration in Post-War Sri Lanka," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 632–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy019>.

¹⁶ "Humanitarian Operation Factual Analysis: July 2006 - May 2009" (Ministry of Defence of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, July 2011), https://web.archive.org/web/20160304055103/https://www.defence.lk/news/20110801_Conf.pdf.

¹⁷ Friedman, "Remnants of a Checkered Past."

¹⁸ Osantha N Thalpapwila, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration as a Key Activity of Post- War Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka" 2, no. 12 (2015).

¹⁹ Friedman, "Remnants of a Checkered Past."

²⁰ Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, "Sri Lanka's Rehabilitation Program: A New Frontier in Counter Terrorism and Counter Insurgency," *SRI LANKA*, no. 2 (n.d.), https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_4-2/prism105-122_Hettiarachchi.pdf.

²¹ Hettiarachchi.

²² Hettiarachchi.

²³ Hettiarachchi.

²⁴ Hettiarachchi.

²⁵ "The Bureau of The Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Prison Reforms, Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Hindi Religious Affairs," n.d., <https://bcgr.gov.lk/history.php>.

²⁶ Melissa Martin, "Sri Lanka's Ex-Combatant Rehabilitation Programme: Reconstructing Gendered Identities," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 12, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 79–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1281755>.

²⁷ Martin.

²⁸ "The Bureau of The Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Prison Reforms, Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Hindi Religious Affairs."

²⁹ "The Bureau of The Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Prison Reforms, Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Hindi Religious Affairs."

Women and DDR

Of course, women experience reintegration differently. Some, particularly those who joined with support from their families, have simply returned to their communities, and are celebrated by family and friends for their contributions to the LTTE.³⁰ Many others still face barriers to community and personal acceptance. For example, among those women who have gone through reintegration training, the military's regular check-in visits restrain their mobility, affect their job prospects, and strain their relationships. Female cadres report that visits by the military generate fear



53 former LTTE cadres were married in Vavuniya, 2011.
Photo by Indi Samarajiva on Flickr

among family and community members.³¹ Used for surveillance, the check-ins are framed as contributing to social reintegration, but this situation increases distrust and stigma between the community and former cadres. The military check-ins have made the women less employable, as the frequent visits expose their identities as former combatants.³² Surveillance causes people to be wary of association with the cadres, and the stigma of former cadres being “uncontrollable” also makes them undesirable as employees and wives.³³ Women's family members often pressure them into marriages with older men who have problems with alcohol or are abusive.³⁴ Further, women in Tamil society have reported wide-scale sexual harassment and assault. As highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, sexual assault in the context of any ethnic conflict has community-

wide implications given that ‘the female body is a symbol of a community's honor and inner sanctum.’³⁵ Tamil women continue to attract sexual harassment because of their status as prior cadres. For example, female cadres highlight visits ‘at anytime’ and ‘under any pretext’³⁶ by military officials for the purpose of surveillance. To this day there are allegations that soldiers use rape or the threat of rape as a means of gathering intelligence.³⁷

Women who joined the LTTE because of their promises of liberation may have a more complex relationship with their former combatant status. During the war both men and women served in high ranking positions within the LTTE, projecting an image of gender equality to outsiders. In reality women may have been fulfilling these roles out of convenience to the group;³⁸ nevertheless, this was an opportunity for women to lead significantly different lives than they were expected to otherwise. Female combatants continue to face stigma as a result of allegations of promiscuity and impropriety during war.³⁹ Thus, the reconstruction of gendered identities was a large part of former cadres' attempted reintegration into society. This shift in gender roles was exacerbated by a shift in power dynamics between former cadres and the greater civilian population. The stigma against the female cadres is twofold, making rehabilitation more challenging for women, as they deal with their identities as women and as former combatants. This has led to a marginalization of female ex-combatants, which infringes upon their political autonomy and silences

³⁰ Friedman, “Remnants of a Checkered Past.”

³¹ Friedman.

³² Friedman.

³³ Friedman.

³⁴ Friedman.

³⁵ Tasha Manoranjan, “Beaten but Not Broken: Tamil Women in Sri Lanka,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2010): 139–47.

³⁶ Friedman, “Remnants of a Checkered Past.”

³⁷ Friedman.

³⁸ Martin, “Sri Lanka's Ex-Combatant Rehabilitation Programme.”

³⁹ Friedman, “Remnants of a Checkered Past.”

their feminist voices.

The Sri Lankan state has been complicit in perpetuating the stigma former cadres experience; it has “portrayed LTTE women as exploited and brainwashed,” discounting their agency and the rational decision-making processes that led many to join the conflict.⁴⁰ The government perpetuated the narrative that female LTTE fighters were problematic women who ran astray, entering combat for social or personal reasons. This enabled the state to direct the reintegration process at restoring women to what they saw as ‘proper feminine roles’ such as beauticians, seamstresses, and nursery schoolteachers.⁴¹ Finally, the reintegration programs encouraged single women to marry quickly, even using that as a measurement of reintegration, assuming that women with family obligations were less vulnerable to future radicalization.⁴²

Policy Recommendations

Sri Lanka’s DDR program is well-intentioned and well-funded but fails to address the gendered dimensions of reintegration. Sri Lanka must focus on three areas moving forward with DDR programs: the economic, social, and political impacts that DDR can and should have for former female combatants.

First, the Sri Lankan government should invest broadly in non-feminized economic opportunities for marginalized communities, particularly former female cadres. The money is there – the 2018 budget allocated \$80 million to reconciliation programs⁴³ - but the government must carefully consider resource allocation and program design. DDR programs should acknowledge and celebrate skills women built during the civil war, providing avenues for women to use them in their future work. It should remove aspects of programs that require women to conform to gender norms and encourage women to live authentically. Increased training and access to resources is vital, particularly in support of the above-mentioned loan programs, which would significantly benefit from improved oversight. By supporting women’s entry into a broader range of jobs, former cadres have the opportunity to benefit from their time with the Tamil Tigers, rather than being siloed into ‘women’s’ work.

Second, DDR programs must address social aspects of former cadres’ reintegration. Sri Lanka should work with religious and community leaders to support women’s ability to rejoin their communities in roles they choose for themselves. Psychosocial programs for former fighters should continue and expand; they must continue to be spaces where women can process their experiences and mourn their friends and colleagues. Facilitating closure ensures that women are able to understand what has happened and where they are now and can be significant in preventing future conflict. DDR programs should also spend time with religious and community leaders themselves – these leaders set the tone for the community and can influence the way former cadres are treated when other residents find out their involvement with the Tigers. Full reintegration can only be achieved through acceptance by the community; otherwise former cadres will continue to lead semi-hidden lives, unable to let their friends and neighbors know them fully.

Importantly, widespread sexual harassment must be addressed and curbed. A conflict only heightens the existing conditions of inequality and issues among society, where it is evident in the case of conflict based SGBV issues against Tamil women. This is unfortunately, a common grievance amongst not only Tamil women but also women in general in the country. As we have seen over time with gruesome cases of rape and harassment, it is important to ensure the public safety of women and to address systemic harassment of women in society may it be Tamil or Sinhalese or of any other ethnicity.

Last, Tamil people have been intentionally sidelined in Sri Lankan politics for decades. Former female fighters are

⁴⁰ Friedman, 636.

⁴¹ Friedman, “Remnants of a Checkered Past.”

⁴² Friedman.

⁴³ Holly Robertson, “From Soldiers to Housewives: Women Who Fought as Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka Are Forced into Traditional Roles,” *Washington Post*, accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/the-women-who-fought-for-the-tamil-tigers-in-sri-lanka-are-being-forced-into-traditional-roles/2018/06/06/6894df7a-681a-11e8-bea7-c8eb28bc52b1_story.html.

further silenced because they are Tamil, they are women, and because of their previous role in the civil war; their needs are not and cannot be fully addressed at the highest level without representation. Providing avenues for known former cadres to take on political roles will elevate the status of all former cadres. This political voice will ensure cadres have some political protection and may help the country to avoid future conflict.